

Pandemics and Bird Flu Fact Sheet

November 3, 2005

There are no cases of bird flu in Wisconsin or the United States. We are actively looking for human cases in Wisconsin and have plans in place to respond, if necessary. At this time, there is no imminent threat to Wisconsin since there is no evidence of sustained human-to-human spread of the bird flu in Southeast Asia. It is difficult to predict if the bird flu virus will become a pandemic, but Wisconsin has been prepared since 2001 for a possible influenza pandemic, regardless of the source.

What is the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic?

The main difference is the number of people infected and the area that is hit by a disease. An epidemic affects many people within a population, community or region at the same time. A pandemic affects an exceptionally high number of people in a wide geographic area, such as worldwide.

When will the next pandemic happen?

We do not know when the next influenza pandemic will occur. Historically, influenza pandemics occur three to four times every 100 years. The last influenza pandemic occurred in 1968 with the Hong Kong flu. The most severe influenza pandemic in recent times was the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, which killed approximately 20 million people worldwide. The last time scientists thought there might be a worldwide pandemic was in 1978 with the swine flu, but that pandemic did not occur.

Why are health officials concerned about the bird flu?

The virus that is circulating in Southeast Asia is a new virus, so people's immune systems may not be prepared to fight this infection, causing more people to become sick than the typical flu season.

Have there been any cases of bird flu in the United States or Wisconsin?

No, there have not been any human cases of the H5N1 bird flu strain that is circulating in Asia in either the U.S. or Wisconsin.

Is the bird flu going to cause a pandemic?

The virus in Southeast Asia has not mutated to a point where it could easily spread from person-to-person and it's difficult to predict if – or when – that might happen, or if it will result in an influenza pandemic. The people who have gotten the bird flu in Southeast Asia have been in direct contact with infected birds.

If there is a bird flu pandemic, how many people will get sick and die?

More people would get sick compared to the typical flu season which occurs each year in the United States. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), each year an average 5% to 20% of the population nationwide gets the flu, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, and about 36,000 people die from flu.

How is Wisconsin preparing for the bird flu?

Wisconsin created a pandemic influenza plan in 2001 that is designed to limit sickness and death during an influenza pandemic. It involves continued surveillance for the virus, infection control methods and assuring sufficient medical services. It also defines the role of state and local government in order to help control the spread of bird flu. The plan is online at <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/preparedness/EmergencyPlans.htm>.

Since January 1, 2004, Wisconsin has been identifying and testing sick individuals for bird flu if there is a possibility they were exposed to the virus, such as travelers who have recently returned from Southeast Asia and have flu-like symptoms. Wisconsin has tested 18 people that have met the criteria, but no cases of confirmed bird flu have been identified. Wisconsin's criteria for testing people for bird flu exceeds the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations.

What are Wisconsin's local public health agencies doing to prepare for bird flu?

They are developing or updating their own pandemic influenza response plans and are conducting practice exercises with neighboring communities or counties to test their plan.

Wisconsin businesses are encouraged to prepare plans that will help them maintain basic services when large numbers of their employees may not be able to work for extended periods of time due to illness.

What is the national plan for preparing for bird flu?

The U.S. Government has been working with the World Health Organization and many other countries to work on pandemic influenza preparations. President Bush has asked Congress for \$7.1 billion for research, vaccine development, medications and surveillance. Wisconsin has not received any direction yet from the federal government as to how much money we'd receive or how much antiviral medication the state would be allotted. Any additional guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will be incorporated into Wisconsin's pandemic influenza plan.

Is there a vaccine I can get to protect me against bird flu?

Not at this time. The National Institutes of Health is developing a vaccine to protect against the current strain (H5N1) of the bird flu virus. The plan is to stockpile enough doses to vaccinate 20 million people once the clinical trials have been completed. Although this vaccine may not match the final bird flu strain that could infect humans, it may be close enough to provide some protection and reduce symptoms of the virus until a final version of the vaccine can be created.

Will there be enough bird flu vaccine?

Not in the beginning of an influenza pandemic because it would take several months to prepare, test and distribute a vaccine since scientists need a sample of a new virus strain before they can produce a vaccine to protect against it. Wisconsin will follow any U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for distributing a vaccine.

What is Tamiflu® and how can it help me?

Tamiflu® is an antiviral medication that is used to reduce the severity of flu symptoms and the amount of time the person is sick. The federal government is working to stockpile antivirals in

the event of a bird flu pandemic, which the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will distribute to each state.

Should I buy some Tamiflu®?

It is not recommended to purchase Tamiflu® or any other antiviral medication at this time. Doctors will need antivirals this season to treat people who have the typical influenza virus. Also, if Tamiflu® is used incorrectly, the drug may become less effective against the bird flu, if it were needed.

Should I bother to get the flu vaccine this year since it wouldn't protect me against bird flu?

The bird flu strain that has been detected in Southeast Asia is *not* the same as the typical influenza virus that circulates each year in Wisconsin. Health officials encourage you to get your flu vaccine to help prevent complications caused by the typical flu, such as pneumonia or hospitalization. To get your influenza vaccine, contact your health care provider, local public health department or tribal health clinic

Since there isn't a vaccine for bird flu yet, what can I do to protect myself and my family?

Ways to protect yourself from any influenza virus include:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based waterless hand sanitizer.
- Avoid being exposed to people who are sick with flu-like symptoms.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue whenever you cough or sneeze – then throw the tissue away. This will help prevent spreading any germs to other people.
- Avoid exposing your infant unnecessarily to large crowds.
- Do not share food utensils such as cups, straws, forks or spoons.
- Frequently clean commonly touched surfaces such as door knobs, refrigerator handle, telephone, or water faucets.
- Do not smoke around children.
- If you think you have the flu, stay home, get rest, drink plenty of liquids and avoid using alcohol and tobacco.

Should I stop eating chicken or turkey? What about any wild birds from hunting?

There is no reason to stop eating chicken, turkey or wild birds. It is critical to cook the meat to an internal temperature of 165° to prevent bacterial infections.

Should hunters take any special precautions when handling birds?

No, there is nothing special you need to do to protect yourself against bird flu.

Who has the best information about bird flu?

It's important to get information from trusted, reputable medical sources. Be sure to look for information and guidance from local and state health officials. For additional information about bird flu, see:

- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>
- World Health Organization at <http://www.who.int/en/>